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CHARITY TOWARDS OUR ENEMIES

FROM A PASTORAL LETTER
BY
CARDINAL MERCIER

LONDON :
ALABASTER, PASSMORE & SONS, LTD.

1917

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Charity towards Our Enemies

Under the date of January, 1917, Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Mechlin, wrote to his priests a letter dealing with the Pastoral Virtues proper to the Present Hour, from which the following is taken:

CATHOLICS beyond our frontiers—who did not find it in their hearts to utter a word of reprobation when the German armies were slaughtering the innocent inhabitants of Dinant, Virton, Andenne, Tamines, Aerschot and Louvain, shooting our priests, burning our open towns and defenceless villages; who propagated, or allowed to be propagated, the calumnies which sought to exculpate the criminals by transforming the victims into aggressors; who for the last three years have been looking on with folded arms, unpitied eyes, and closed lips at the torture of a nation, their former friends, who had felt nothing but goodwill for Germany—these very Catholics are now, in pathetic accents, chanting hymns to Christian fraternity, forgetfulness of the past, and peace.

CHARITY TOWARDS OUR ENEMIES

Very confused notions seem to be prevalent on the subject of our relations of charity and justice towards the enemy of our Belgian Fatherland. The present occasion seems a favourable one for recalling certain points of doctrine of the master *par excellence* of Christian theology, Saint Thomas Aquinas.

There are in the heart of man two deeply rooted propensities, the one towards enjoyment, the other towards anger. The object of the first is the possession of some good; enjoyment is the outcome of this possession. The object of the second is to avert some evil, or to rebel against that evil when it overtakes us.

These two propensities are common to animals and ourselves; in animals, they take the forms of desire and passion; in ourselves, they exist not only as desire and passion, but also as reasonable inclination.

An inclination to pleasure, sensitive or supersensitive, lies outside the question with which we are concerned; what we are now examining is the propensity to anger and vengeance, animal passion or inclination of the reasonable will.

Saint Thomas defines anger as an appetite for vengeance, *ira est appetitus vindictæ*. This appetite may be rooted in the sensitive part of our nature, or in our supersensitive will. How are we to judge it from the moral point of view?

CHARITY TOWARDS OUR ENEMIES

It may be good or evil, replies Saint Thomas, it may engender an act of virtue or a sin, according as to whether the object of the avenging will is just and equitable or not. "To have the will to avenge evil, while respecting the order of justice, is to perform a virtuous act. To desire thus the redress of a moral wrong, within the limits of law, is to be angry with evil, to perform a work of zeal, to act rightly."

But to desire vengeance immoderately, whether by overstepping lawful limits, or by making the destruction of the offender the first consideration, and the repression of evil a secondary object, is to act wrongly; in this latter case, indeed, the suffering of our fellow-creature becomes the object of our vengeance.

And how are we to judge of the participation of *passion* in this avenging wrath? Does morality demand that the will to take vengeance on evil should be impassible?

No, replies Saint Thomas, on the contrary. Passion is, no doubt, dangerous at the moment when a man has to decide as to the morality of an act to be accomplished; it may then, indeed, perturb the serenity of judgment. But directly the justice of an act of repression is evident, and the morality of such repression has been agreed upon, the passion of anger becomes the auxiliary of the will, it reinforces the vigour and promptitude with which justice is accomplished; the passions, thus

CHARITY TOWARDS OUR ENEMIES

kept within proper bounds, are, says Saint Thomas, useful to virtue, *utiles virtute*.

The application of these principles to the present situation is obvious: the injustice of the violation of our territory is flagrant, and is, indeed, admitted by those responsible for it. The disregard of our rights, from the fatal days of the invasion to the present, is patent. The repression of these iniquities is therefore a manifest right, and for those in a position to perform it, a duty. To desire that this right should be exercised, that order should be re-established, that the offenders against order should be chastised and rendered incapable of doing further injury; to desire that inoffensive people should be able to live in peace; that the last word should be said by the side of right and to the honour of the God of Justice; to desire this with all the energy of our will and all the passionate ardour of which our human nature is capable, is to answer to the requirements of justice, it is to perform an act of virtue.

But this, it is objected, implies hate, and charity excludes hate.

Undoubtedly, charity excludes hate; hate is its antithesis; charity and hate are as mutually exclusive as fire and water; they cannot co-exist in one person.

But what is it to hate? It is to wish evil to another for evil's sake, to desire that our fellow-creature should suffer merely that he may suffer,

CHARITY TOWARDS OUR ENEMIES

that is, to make his suffering a consummation on which we dwell complacently. Such a spiritual state would be highly culpable.

On the other hand, to desire that physical evil should overtake him who has committed an injustice and who persists in it, not as an end in itself, but as a means to an ulterior moral end; to desire that an offender should suffer in order that, under the stress of suffering, that conversion which he refuses to accomplish voluntarily may take place in his soul, is not to hate him; on the contrary, it is to love him rationally.

“I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.”

Following the example of our God, we do not wish that our enemies should be excluded from Paradise, but that they should become worthy of entering therein.

He who loves well chastises well, says the proverb. The love of avenging justice may be carried to excess, and degenerate into cruelty; but it may also err by omission, and refrain from inflicting just punishment on the guilty.

Virtue lies in the golden mean. For the desire to execute vengeance for evil is properly a virtue. Saint Thomas esteems it a special virtue which, in each one of us, completes the natural repulsion we feel for all things noxious to us, causes us to repel harm when it threatens us, and incites us to vengeance when it strikes at us.

CHARITY TOWARDS OUR ENEMIES

What would you say of those who, on the plea of meekness, should wish to shut up prisons and suppress the penal code?

The collective crime of a nation which violates the rights of another nation is incomparably greater than that of the individual whom society condemns to prison or the guillotine.

We can easily understand that he who is doubtful of the justice of his cause should endeavour to see in war only subjects for pity or horror. But for us, war is the means of enforcing respect for honour, of causing Right to triumph, of establishing Truth and the worship of the God of Truth in high places. And this is why war is full of greatness and justifies such sacrifices!

Let us therefore be careful not to confound hatred, a vice, with the spirit of just vengeance, a virtue.

Hatred is inspired by an instinct of destruction.

The virtue of vengeance is inspired by charity. Valour makes way for it, by banishing fear from the heart; the King, the Government and the people of Belgium manifested this greatness of soul at midnight on August 2, when they braved the insolence of the military Colossus who was about to fall upon us.

When fear is banished the upright soul looks Duty in the face; it regards offences against truth, justice, and God as offences against itself;

CHARITY TOWARDS OUR ENEMIES

the peril of its brethren becomes its own peril ; it is fired by the double love of God and of humanity ; it accepts self-sacrifice—anything rather than submission in dishonour.

This is charity, and the zeal which is its flame.

This great act of charity was approved by the Belgian people ; they remain faithful thereto ; their tears, their strength, their fortune, and their blood do not seem to them too much to offer for the triumph of Right and the safeguarding of their independence.

We shall be told perhaps : You have invoked strict justice, and we understand your claim. But there is another point of view, that of Christian perfection. Is it not more perfect to return good for evil ? Ought not the Christian to be able to forgive ?

Yea, to return good for evil would be well if it were a question only of individual wrongs suffered in secret.

But as a fact, dear colleagues, there are in the parishes of your deaneries hundreds of homes which have been ravaged, pillaged and burnt ; the absentees, either military prisoners or deported civilians, are legion. Is it to avenge these personal wrongs that your people demand justice ? In the name of my own experience, and sure as to the nature of yours, I venture to answer : No !

It is the injury done to the nation which has aroused general indignation and requires repara-

CHARITY TOWARDS OUR ENEMIES

tion. Outrages on public order must not remain unpunished. The prince who should systematically show mercy to criminals would endanger social security. Peoples who would amnesty injustice would not be worthy of liberty.

True, the Gospel inclines to pardon. But the Church knows on what conditions this can be granted. Let us follow her example. She demands that the offender should confess his fault; that he should repent; that he should promise not to repeat his offence; and, if his fault be an injustice, that he should make restitution, in accordance with Saint Augustine's well-known declaration: *Non remittetur peccatum, nisi restituatur ablatum*; and the acceptance of a penance commensurate with the penalties incurred by the sin committed.

As soon as our enemies have fulfilled these conditions, the hour of mercy will have struck for them.

Certain sentimental souls are occasionally disturbed by recollection of the words in the Gospel: "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."

But if you desire to understand this evangelical precept aright, says Saint Augustine, study the example of Our Lord Himself. When our Divine Master was examined before Caiaphas, an officer dared to strike Him in the face. Our gentle Saviour did not say: "Here is the other cheek." He presented this dilemma to the aggressor: "If I have

CHARITY TOWARDS OUR ENEMIES

spoken evil, bear witness of the evil ; but if well, why smitest thou Me?"

The Apostle Saint Paul also, remarks Saint Augustine, was on one occasion publicly smitten on the mouth by order of the High Priest, Ananias. Did the accused suffer this in silence? " God shall smite thee, thou whited wall," he rejoined, " for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?" To this retort Saint Paul further added a sentence of subtle and scathing irony.

The Gospel precept must not be taken literally. Its meaning is that, under all circumstances, the Christian must be master of himself, and able to preserve his internal patience. As to his external conduct, it must depend upon the conditions. A truly wise benevolence will often demand that one should exercise a certain harshness to one's neighbour ; one must be able to correct him in spite of himself, and to consider his true interests rather than his preferences.

But did not God say in the Book of Deuteronomy : " To me belongeth vengeance and recompense " ?

And does not Saint Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, repeat this precept : " If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath ; for it is written : Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord " ?

CHARITY TOWARDS OUR ENEMIES

Obviously, these inspired texts do not mean that God reserves to His own immediate action all exercise of repressive justice, for in this very Letter to the Romans from which these texts are taken, the Apostle Saint Paul expressly says that the representatives of public power "bear the sword . . . to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil."

This, says Saint Thomas, is the meaning of these words of Scripture: "External offences are to be dealt with by the public powers, but I reserve to Myself the power of judging and punishing hidden faults. And you, Christians, refrain from hasty judgments. *Nolite ante tempus judicare.*"

Or again, says the holy Doctor, the texts may have another meaning: "The crimes of men offend God. Therefore justice and reparation belong to God. It is to usurp a divine prerogative to ascribe the intention of justice to oneself."

Finally, a last question: Is it right for the clergy to take part in the conflicts brought about by the war and the occupation? Are not the functions of the Bishop and his priests exclusively confined to the spiritual needs of souls?

The Church is not an invisible society of pure spirits. The faithful are exposed to perils of the body and of the soul, of time and of eternity. The solicitude of their pastors must embrace all these interests. Hear, further, Saint Thomas Aquinas on this point: "The

CHARITY TOWARDS OUR ENEMIES

pastors of the Church must not be content only to resist the wolves which inflict spiritual death on their flocks; they must also make a stand against the ravishers and tyrants who cause them to suffer physically. Not that the representatives of ecclesiastical authority should themselves handle material weapons; but they should make use of their spiritual weapons, that is to say, they should address salutary warnings to the guilty, they should pray fervently, they should punish obstinate rebels with excommunication."

The ambiguities we have endeavoured to clear up in this view of charity towards the enemy arise from an inadequate conception of charity.

In the eyes of many persons ill informed of the doctrines of Christianity, the virtues are like so many parallel threads. These threads are of unequal value, perhaps; charity is, no doubt, of a superior quality, but none the less it appears to be juxtaposed to the other threads of the weaver's warp.

Thus, we can understand, the mind accepts the idea of a charity without justice, and then casts about for a means of reconciling the two.

But in reality things are not so; charity is a woof which forms a single tissue with all the threads of our Christian virtues.

Broadly speaking, there is but one precept: We must love God, and love our fellow-men out of our love for God.

CHARITY TOWARDS OUR ENEMIES

The Christian should be temperate, strong, just, prudent, but by charity ; he should believe in God, and hope in Him, but by charity ; he should practise charity, by charity. Charity is the sole inspirer and director of the whole moral and religious life.

There is no Christian justice without charity, and no charity without justice. And as avenging justice is a part of the virtue of justice, there is no charity without avenging justice. To desire to close our eyes to injustice, under the pretext of heroism in charity, and to allow the enemy to commit crimes with impunity, because he is the enemy, is to fail to recognise the sovereign and necessary sway of charity in the organisation of the moral, individual, and social life of Christianised humanity.







